

# Spine & Spike

Poems by  
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Advisor

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— Taylor Brunson

*For my mother,  
always.*

*“Why do we hunger so for vicious things?”*

*—Robert Lowell*

## Acknowledgements

Some of these poems were previously published as follows:

*Tar Heel Verses*: “Musk Thistle”

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### **Homecoming**

Asphalt unfurls between hills,  
stretching into the horizon  
where one cornfield bleeds into the next,  
rows of stalks like infinite tally marks,  
a record of Kansan tragedies.  
Every twenty or so miles,  
the air conditioner cuts out,  
reviving only after wheels jostle roadkill—  
possums burst red before they blacken,  
their bodies familiar like landmarks, pressing  
themselves into the dust, rigor mortis  
and rot a part of the reverence.  
Before the greeting of any welcome sign,

IF YOU DIED TODAY, WHERE  
WOULD YOU SPEND ETERNITY?

asks a billboard, looming, as locusts  
crackle against the windshield.



### **Ragdoll Cat**

I brake at peripheral movement  
near the road, undulation of pale fur  
in the breeze, a long tail shifting  
at intervals in the gusts of traffic.  
She reclines in the sun, warming  
her silken coat, the bold turquoise  
of collar and golden glint of tag  
brilliant at her throat, shining below  
a head freshly flat on the blacktop.

**Matrilineal**

Wings slash sunlight;  
feathers' parting, the teeth  
of sawblades. Always

circling, the weight  
of you hangs over  
my body, shadow

of vulture on carrion.  
Teach me how  
you have hungered.

**Jones-Meyer, MO**

The maw of the woods  
waits, agape. No lights,  
no markers, the turn  
slinks up on the left,  
swallows you whole,  
ruminates for hours  
while you wind, headlights  
making specters of trees,  
of remains of barns  
rotting on the shoulder.  
Feel the tree line thrum,  
eagerness to bolt into the glare  
of your high beams, eyes  
in the branches glistening,  
welcoming, hungry.

## Turkey Vulture

Who has loved you  
enough to admire

the seam where the molten flesh  
of your face joins the dark  
feathered hunch of your body?

Who appreciates your mismatched parts,  
plump neck topped by a head  
that seems to have been plucked

as clean as your last meal—  
or how delicately the scarlet skin  
creases between hunts, no longer

taut as you peel stringy meat  
from disused skeletons?

Who has dared come near  
enough to observe the sky

through your nostrils' hollow oval,  
inset with a jewel of unbroken blue,  
to study the hooked bone

of your beak lacquered with blood,  
your face deep in the bowels  
of a raccoon, its eyes already

an appetizer for the ants?  
Know that I have lingered  
in such nearness to your filth

and remembered your true name:  
*Cathartes. Purifier.*

**Gutted**

Carrion circle overhead,  
static of midday sky.

The sweetness of meat blooms  
in Midwestern summer  
where kudzu smothers flora

and the sun dotes on the body's  
remains, reckoning with the wasp's  
predilections, flesh, then bone,  
pockmarked and glittering  
beneath a shroud of flies.

### **Swarming**

Breeze stirs crows from where  
they rest in the wiry meniscus  
between utility poles, dark sentry  
of the dust. All at once, they flock,

a translucent sheet woven of wings  
and beaks I know to spill portents,  
undulating, parting, merging again  
to shift and shriek as they obscure

the last of the sun, hastening night's  
arrival with the threat to descend  
and smother me in the promised  
dark of the coming season.



## Husks

For miles, corn rows tower, wearing setting sun's corona  
like a vision of the fire to follow the harvest, fleeting heat in  
a cold season of stalks bleached under moonlight, shivering  
against each other, multitudes huddled on soil riddled  
with brittle shells, their trembling surveyed by silo sentinels recalling  
summer's gilding of the fields, the tasseling before the kernels,  
somewhere warmed to be pressed against lips, the part savored.

**Outside Weston,**

we lie in the fields:  
rain kisses dust,  
passes to reveal

sun's setting, soon  
a golden sickle moon  
settles over the quiet

where our fingers twine  
with switchgrass, then  
I wander into the dark

calling this state  
misery as you keep  
calling my name.

**To Lichens**

Teach me to press  
against what's needed,

where tree bark  
fissures, where stone  
sits cracked in shade,

all for the sake  
of being anchored,

of being touched.  
To know a way  
to love while flaking

away from what holds  
you here, lingering

anyway, scaly patina  
as fragile as I feel  
knowing the way,

on a good night,  
the peppered moths  
crawl where you curl,

let you hold them,  
keep them safe.

**Riverfront**

At our meeting place in muck  
between bank and train tracks,  
moss and damp earth threaten  
to yield beneath feet, to drop us

into the river's slow procession,  
its broad murky winding  
through sparse grasses snapping  
with sheaves of littered plastic:

we enter dusk's confessional,  
our shared affection vanishing  
into foliage, to live and to drift,  
like mayflies, for just one night.



**René Magritte, The Banquet, 1958**

Grass sprawls towards  
a horizon singed  
by vanishing sun  
and we go red, too,  
lit by bloody  
cancellation of trees,  
by lawn biting  
into skin, cravings  
in waning light,  
learning how,  
in the end, even  
earth earns its appetite,  
becomes a mouth, widens.

**Automyth**

Sculpted into godhood  
by the carving of hips against hips,  
glimmering in golden half-light,  
I am salvation  
borne through temptation—

you make me the apple, the serpent,  
the sun, the lotus: I coax  
your mouth to venerate me  
here in this place where moans  
can turn sacrilege into a hymn.

**Mosquito**

She senses me on the strand,  
my heat and soft exhalations  
and the promise of blood  
carried on Floridian breeze.  
Her feathery mooring among  
the hairs of my arm is almost  
unnoticed, so too the quick  
piercing of skin as she drinks  
until fluttering off, leaving  
a rising, reddening mark  
to be scratched, to linger.



**My Fiancé Describes Roadkill He Saw While Driving to Work**

Her stillness in  
the road's shoulder  
was a study in exposing

the throat, skin stretched  
over arteries that no longer  
throbbed as in life, as in

the moment your neck  
might feel my lips, yearn  
for the bite, thrilling,

her arched body gripped  
in morning's chilled veil,  
that fog, her shroud.

**Gator**

Jaws with legs,  
we alike settle back  
into the dark, leave  
the hunt to those  
who believe they should  
have to work for it.  
Brackish, murky,  
the warm water  
embraces us,  
accommodates  
our purposeful patience,  
parting before the strike,  
still latent.  
Good things come  
to those who lie in wait.

**Delicacies**

In the pause between shudders,  
you swallow, taste me again,  
sit up and back to exhale  
and savor what remains—  
I lick the taste of myself  
off your lips, off your fingers  
glinting in scant light  
with the fine honey of the body,  
its viscous drips threaded  
between trembling thighs,  
knees ready to be parted,  
tonight's delectable spread.

## Love Poem

*after Heather Bell's "Love Poem"*

When I think of us,  
I think of the shrike,  
who impales its victims on thorns  
before feasting. A songbird, but a songbird  
that knows the beauty of threat.

I pierce your eyes  
with mine, no matter how tenderly I touch,  
  
touching because of your skin,  
my hunger. The thing I am most hungry for is

your understanding, you hearing me,  
instead of seeing my face  
but not my warnings.

This is the poem where I hope  
you love my sharp tongue  
between your teeth, my lips soft

instruments of kissing and pleasure  
and slaying. Love me as my hands  
navigate the soft of your body. Love me  
as I nest in your heat. Love me  
as I dine across from you

and light seems to set me  
ablaze, the gold of its beams,  
a halo of spears. The thing

about songbirds is that they always  
draw you in. Your eyes pierce mine  
while we lie, face to face, and you  
smile as though  
you had been starving for this.

**Sunday's Roadkill**

Early afternoon heat picks up  
while you point skyward, back leg  
extending toward the blue gaze  
the sky holds over your body,  
bloated in its lonesome waiting,  
rigor immortalizing its end as flies  
compete to taste your tongue,  
lolling pink, pressed to the asphalt.

## **Bodyscape**

I slink through the dark  
over the landscape of you,

let wet kisses map  
ways to make you tremble,

let sighs raise hairs  
to my lips, the prickling

of a raspberry's fur  
just before the bite.

You gasp when I sit back  
into you, opening for

your firm touch when  
you curl around me,

crescent moon embracing  
the radiant dark of space.

\*

Gentle shudders at first touch,

ohs sighed into my shoulder,

pants as skin awakens skin,

sheen just barely glittering

where our bodies meet,

moans caught in throat

between deepening strokes,

guttural foreshadowing of

shifting and bucking, your cadence

broken before resuming,

#

eyes rolling back, fluttering

in a squall of *oh fucks*

that yield to reverential

*oh gods*, rising in volume,

invocations breathed between

my body and yours.

\*

The soft of your stomach fills  
the small of my back then withdraws,  
the prickle of each hair lingering  
in the damp space between us,  
a chasm bridged by entwined arms  
pinning the comforter into place.  
Sleep-slowed, your breath slips  
over my shoulder to cool a breast  
that rises lunar above a tide  
of sheets, to rearrange the dark  
tendrils clinging to my cheek.

### **At the Korean Market**

You point to crabs struggling  
against each other, trapped in blue  
glass tanks that reflect us turning  
toward silvery fish, cradled in  
a bed of ice. Unblinking eyes flash  
from where they lay. Your touch is  
what warms me, slowly pulls me away.  
Your hand wants to remind me  
there is more to see than dead fish.

\*

*There is more to see than dead fish.*  
Your hand wants to remind me  
what warms me, slowly pulls me away  
from where they lay; your touch is  
a bed of ice. Unblinking eyes flash  
toward silvery fish cradled in  
glass tanks that reflect us turning  
against each other. Trapped in blue,  
you point to crabs, struggling.



### **Crows Descend on Fraternity Court**

and I can hear  
my grandmother's voice,  
see her wagging

the broken finger  
that never healed  
quite right and hissing

*Bad luck is coming.*

When a murder of them  
perched on her roof, shadows  
casting crisp shadows

in Nevada sunlight,  
she struggled to warn me  
without her mother

tongue, her language  
of superstition, settled  
for the simple phrase,

*Bad luck is coming,*

So when I see their  
dark feathers gather,  
crowding on lawns

strewn with red cups,  
their hard eyes counting  
each crushed can

trickling tepid beer  
into the soil, I recognize  
where bad luck comes

#

and goes, remember  
the cawing from the roof,  
the brothers emerging

like signs themselves,  
leering at long legs  
in denim shorts as if to say

*Bad luck is coming.*

**Starlite Motel**

All of your darkened windows  
peer back at me, loose bricks strewn  
across vacant parking spots,  
the scattered teeth of the underdog  
after the hurricane's sudden strike.  
Abandoned when the water vacated  
your rooms, your innards stretch  
to the curb: waterlogged couches,  
halves of a headboard, and glass  
glittering against asphalt—  
a reflection of what you hoped to be  
before flickering out at the night's end,  
to be swept away with other debris  
when sunlight renders you skeletal again.



## Naming

*I never felt lonesome, because I knew the names of things.*

—Aimee Nezhukumatathil

In Colorado, we delighted in writing  
 recipes for stews brewed of mud,  
 siblings learning to name ingredients:  
 juniper berries, buffalo grass,  
 every species in our mash of spiders.

Every summer spent in Carolina  
 with Granddaddy at the golf course,  
 we rounded the house by the first hole  
 to chase fireflies renamed Sirius or Aldebaran,  
 always knowing Cassiopeia's toppling  
 zigzag even after we had moved

and come to rely on the steady presence  
 of brown in every Kansan vista,  
 remembering the distinct tufting  
 of each wild grass, comforted in knowing  
 that we could find something to name  
 each time our home changed again.

### **Golf Cart Summers**

Burning in the rough,  
my brother's curls  
catch August light,  
sculpt the yellow glow,

the closest gnats will come  
to seeing a halo—  
they dance in his orbit,  
drift too close, wings sticking  
to his sweaty hairline.

He laughs and laughs,  
amused by the heron  
whose lakeside silhouette  
arrows at our cart,  
nearly startles us off the path,

by those moist pops  
of frogs under our wheels.

### **Dreaming of Sunbathing by the Lake**

Algae suedes water,  
still but whispering

in summer that unfolds  
my body on the bank

as it does the wide petals  
of magnolia, teaches me

to catch midday sun  
while that green fur calls

my name, begs to taste  
sweat running from behind

bent knees, always gets  
exactly what it wants:

I'm beneath it once more,  
unable to see until

someone fishes me out.  
*Mother, I've been here so long.*

When fingers find my ankle,  
I watch the waterlogged

flesh of my leg slip off  
like a sock in her grip.

### **Love Poem for an Abandoned Carousel**

The golden hour renders you sickly,  
the sun having yellowed your white paint  
broken up by scabs of rust emerging  
with every humid day. You grin back  
at me from where you've sunk in the weeds,  
your equine braces long forgotten  
to reveal a heart of mirrors and shattered bulbs  
aching to beam through muck. Where cart paths  
wind through the rough, becoming wrong turns  
in their abandonment, you no longer spin  
but rather rest, still and silent among the late call  
of frogs, the brush whispering against your skin  
through every season, a gentle touch I envy  
as I forego the green, yearning to find you again.



**Peach**

Bite snaps skin

pulled taut before  
the partition of pulp  
sliding between teeth

to the gums, to hang,  
feathery, until tongued  
free. Glazed in juice's

golden gush, lips

press again to  
the fur of the flesh,  
supple and yielding

before the discovery  
of its pit, dressed  
in red, porous, whorled,

a hard heart.

### Greenland Supermarket

Here, no attempt to push East Asia into one corner,  
 no wall of red lacquered boxes, nor the wan smiles  
 of lucky cats, whose militant lines watch over  
 stalks of bamboo yellowing under fluorescents—  
 Grandma's hand trails behind her to find mine.  
 Hand in hand, she is my guide through aisles  
 that smell like her, exhaling the same garlic  
 pungently clinging to dark curls. Slowly,  
 she fills the cart, carefully uses her hand with

the one broken finger ever pointing back:  
 green limbs of scallions mingle in a plastic bag  
 on top of the tofu she picked, its packaging stark,  
 white against the red plastic tub of gochujang  
 nestled in cart's corner. Grandma's reflection  
 in refrigerator doors pulls me along, and my eyes  
 darkly study how she gently pinches  
 fresh rice cakes, the cold cylindrical noodles

barely yielding under her touch. Her hands  
 will stir them into supple submission, steam rising  
 from the roiling red of tteok-bokki, my favorite.  
 For now, she tows me along through fish smell  
 wafting from the bright icy cases that make gems  
 of their silvered eyes. She passes them without a glance,  
 the shine of their scales casting a pale gleam  
 on the proud set of the jaw I hope I've inherited.

### Year of the Snake

Loosed from taut coils  
wound atop her head  
  
to slither downwards,  
hiss against jacket fabric,  
  
crossed strands become  
plaited rattlesnakes  
  
furious and whipping  
from the nape of her neck  
  
with the cautionary rattle  
of every step's nearing  
  
click. They shift to pile,  
shine against sloping  
  
shoulders when she settles,  
the forked wisp where  
  
they taper a flickering  
tongue ready to taste  
  
air's shimmer, heat of her  
readiness to strike—  
  
she twists on herself  
again, my viper sister,  
  
retreats into shade  
and, prepared to shed  
  
every restrictive skin,  
bides her time.

### **Writing Spiders**

On the planetarium  
lawn, twin stars sunk  
in the green, gilt  
abdomens glowing  
as you tend to  
your webs, sisters  
weaving side by side,  
undisturbed  
by the next catch,  
tangled in stabilimenta,  
your lethal script.

### **Texas Field Trip**

Antsy, we scrambled  
from yellow buses,

past jungle gyms  
and into scrub to pluck

smooth pebbles from muck  
like relics, inspect how

they fit in our palms  
under sun overheating us

until we grew bored  
and turned to eating

wild blackberries staining  
fingers bruise purple

with every bite,  
dripping sour blood.

We hid in sharp brambles,  
wrestled in weeds,

hunted wriggling worms  
where we knelt in soggy earth,

until one of us cut  
our hand on broken glass

and froze at the sight  
of blood running

over mud dark moons  
of nails, only part

of the day in our young  
memories that night.

**Hunt**

Sun reflects off the firm arch  
of leaves, the armored stillness  
of horned holly cloaking

hawk's roost, talons hooked  
to branch; her eyes darken  
before prey's abrupt eruption,

the shower of bloody berries  
as lesser birds surge into light,  
the red-tail in holiday pursuit.

**Patio at Dusk**

The hour burns  
backyard's landscape,  
sun's departing

glance crackling  
where fall wind  
ripples and rustles,

snapping through  
brittle grass  
as crickets chirp

a dirge, mourning  
the day's corpses,  
the trees' ochre

and umber pennants,  
each brightened  
by the first touch

and stark in the grasp  
of another year's  
quick passing.

### **Bedtime Ritual**

Imagine  
your body suspended  
inches over open  
ocean rippling.  
Sink  
toes and arches  
into liquid mirror sky  
until even calves  
disappear  
in reflected wisps  
of cirrus clouds,  
knees, thighs easing in.  
Then wet hips, navel,  
water pooling  
against  
sternum, over  
shoulders, slope  
of long neck,  
sea presses into  
seam of closed lips,  
closed eyes,  
rising,  
hair spreading  
on the surface:  
let mind vanish  
into depths,  
past coral rainbows,  
kelp swirling,  
down  
until bioluminescent  
invitations  
of angler fish  
are the only stars  
in the dark.  
Even they know  
how to be swallowed,  
mute to black.  
You can finally  
drift to sleep.



### **Dreaming of Hands**

They rise from the garden,  
clenched or reaching,

their digits flexed

and stilled, poised to grasp.  
Amidst mulch, between

bursts of flowering

monkey grass, some catch  
the sun's reflection in

the polished bronze

stalks of their fingers  
while others cool

in shade, their stone made

porous and crusted  
with pale lichens,

scaly and flaking away.

What germinates at my feet?  
Wrists prepared to writhe,

to gain purchase

from where they part  
dark soil, for now

their vigilant palms watching

like wide blossoms opening  
for something yet unnamed.

**Executioner**

Shattering midsummer morning,  
ringing shrilly from neighbor's porch:  
*You're doing the devil's work!*

Her hand trembles, index finger pointing  
at the board adorned with grasshoppers  
whose long legs have yet to still, bodies  
snatched from where they plagued  
the garden and skewered into place,

then at my brother's freckled face  
before it splits into a grin, eyes  
holding hers as he pins the last one  
into place, nail spearing thorax  
and board with a squelching crunch.

**Black-Throated Sparrow**

A trill ripples through the shrub,

bright, vibrating defense against  
my too-close steps to the nest  
I notice in creosote's shade,

bush blooming yellow stars

in dusty quivering heat.  
Above your pupil's glossy watch  
over eggs, white feathers

angle on your face into a protective

father's brow, trusting small  
warbles are enough to guard  
young from every threat

slinking in the brush.

## Road Trips

Clammy feet smack  
     in Dad's Chevy, unsticking  
         from the dashboard, toe prints  
             left next to the rough scars

inflicted the July day  
     an air freshener overheated,  
         apple-red jelly dripping,  
             melting the gray plastic

above the radio. Cool air drifts  
     to the back seat, carrying the hot stink  
         of our dogs, eager and panting,  
             pacing back and forth across

the adults' laps to press wet noses  
     against windows, their smears  
         of snot drying like clusters  
             of swirling ghosts. We kids ignore

their whining, our legs tangled  
     criss-cross-applesauce to curl  
         more easily around a book,  
             my brother's Gameboy humming.

Squeezed between siblings:  
     always me, oldest but smallest,  
         in the middle seat, the least room  
             with the best view, the windshield's

framing of each region  
     over many hours, over many years,  
         watching terrain I was too young  
             to recognize as my first love—

east coast roads barricaded  
     by dense trees, blackened by  
         nightfall against a zoetropic moon  
             trying to keep the truck's pace,

#

the Peachoid suddenly rearing its head,  
     orange shine plunging behind foliage,  
         our grill a grinning insect cemetery.  
             in muggy South Carolina.

Or passing Midwestern cornfields,  
     billboards threatening arrival  
         in hell, wind farms' turbines  
             brilliant in the sun, Kansan wind

rushing through grasses that cover  
     plains seeming to reach Texas,  
         cracked roads pitted and pocked  
             with potholes that jolt the truck,

my sleeping sister's head  
     bouncing to smack the window.  
         Yellow flats and their cattle shift  
             to Southwest's red ramble toward horizon,

roads rising for hours to wrap  
     around plateaus, their striations a record  
         towering over expanses of burning soil,  
             saguaros like trophies of survival.

When scorching sun yields, slips  
     between mesas, stars emerge sharp  
         above motels outlined in neon,  
             blues and pinks lingering behind

closed lids, our family settled in beds,  
     ghost of smoke in every non-smoking room,  
         our legs pressed together under cold sheets  
             as I dream those high ways, one way to return.



### **Unknown Bird**

First only visible where long  
neck meets shoulders, your head  
cocks, alert to sounds of me  
pausing in the driveway,

grateful for the barrier  
of windshield and car doors  
as you cascade onto the hood  
from your rooftop perch,  
plucking feathers, down  
of unseen prey now gray snow  
in Texas midsummer, all the while

meeting my eyes, your own  
crimson-ringed, blazing  
as you fixate on my face,  
never cease tearing the unknown  
bird in your talons. Our proximity,  
our locked gaze, is a reflection:  
two animals who love to rend.

**I-40 Pollock**

Rubber makes meat a medium,  
grinds muscle to red pulp  
staining traffic lines across  
ten feet of concrete, residue  
of days of action. Strips  
of tawny hide lay pressed  
under the sun, glistening,  
still moist where without head  
or legs, scraps of torso  
linger, the clean white of a rib  
lustrous in the fleshy detritus.



**Nearing Olivia Gas**

The red needle sinks toward E, lower  
with every mile, dangling over hollowness

when the sign rises into view, white script  
peeling back over green plastic beneath.

The tree line parts: a vanished gas station,  
no asphalt, no pumps, no building in sight,

just a lot long grown over with yellowed grass,  
as empty between tall pines as my tank.

### **Water and Oil**

In the absence of radio,  
white noise of wheels  
over fractured asphalt,

dull crackle around us;

I look away from you, up,  
studying clouds divided  
like blots of oil on water,

moonlit gaps between them,

lofty glares of fissure  
and withdrawal not  
unlike those we share.

**Migraine**

forges a path from behind  
eye, up to brow bone, over  
cranium to cradle my head

in vibrant agony, burning  
like aurora borealis, warp  
of color, of awe-inspiring

pain cutting through dark  
mind's shifting forgetting,  
an ache impossible to grasp.

### Good Night

The light's thin fingertips  
slip beneath the door to cool

themselves on the hardwood,  
soothing your brow that twitches

once, then twice, before stilling.  
I watch your hair quiver

in the fan's current, strands  
shimmering against your forehead,

smoothed by deeper sleep.  
Blankets rustle in near-silence.

This our first time in weeks  
side by side, no threat humming

between us like bedsheets,  
thin and taut, stretched by bodies

pulling away from each other.  
I study the soft planes of your face,

your mouth no longer twisting  
with the effort of biting your tongue.

A single snore huffs against my cheek.  
I turn away and whisper *Goodnight*.

### **Dreaming of Traps**

I name your freckles  
in accordance with those  
I love most and least,

your back pale and glistening,  
unbothered by the grass  
shivering at your touch

but my hands have  
the privilege of teasing  
out sighs, your forehead

against my cheek as your lips  
brush where clavicle meets throat  
and I could almost

love you, let you play  
prey, your wide eyes calling  
me from the musical dark,

a fallow deer. I cradle you,  
tender as you are, forget  
I cannot pretend

until I forget my hands,  
but remember my teeth. Then  
I gut you like game.

### **Turkey Vulture**

To see you is to know  
what lies below: a failure

of organs not far from  
the highway. A meal

collapsed after dragging  
its own stricken weight,

age or injury making  
it ripe for your pickings.

I want to know what it is  
to be blameless when you devour

a fellow being, the bloated body  
slowly exhaling its own decay

into your nostrils and the curl  
of your smirking beak saying

*the hard work is not mine to do.*

**Remains**

The knife still wears  
the limp skins

of scallions, rests  
against a scar-mapped

cutting board,  
slimy in the light

with vegetables'  
sweaty protest

against the blade  
before I scooped

their small slivers  
between my hands

parched by soap,  
catching gouges

pouting splinters  
from the wood,

reminders of what  
remains: residue,

rice grains sticking  
like dried maggots

inside their pots,  
the crust of sauce

masking wilting  
vegetables I can't

bring myself to eat,  
asking from the sink

if my appetite was worth  
the work after all.

**Serpent**

Shadow disrupts afternoon's warmth,  
collecting where you have unspooled  
from the cool beneath hedges to heat  
scales' dark shine amidst weeds.  
I loom above, shovel raised, ready  
to deal with a threat unreciprocated,  
to watch your body roil long after  
its head has been severed by  
decisive thrust of blunt blade into earth  
where, in girlhood, I knelt to pray  
for the redemption of a devil like you.





### **Behind the Church**

The only kiss, how long  
awaited. Hands jaundiced  
in streetlight make shaky arcs

to find, frame my jaw  
aching for fingertips to reach  
the arch of my neck.

You pin my shoulders  
against the cool of bricks.  
Your lips, softly closed,

press mine before you slip  
back through the door where  
I forget he waits inside,

the pastor's son waiting  
to claim my hand again.

**Rind**

I lie back, still,  
as his fingers pump,  
rough and probing  
like he is searching  
for some lost prize.  
I manage a gasp,  
out of politeness—  
he brings his mouth  
to the surface of my flesh  
and leaves behind the rind  
of a hollowed out melon,  
my sweetness scraped out,  
tasted, then swallowed.

**Jackal Flies**

Bred in den of carrion, bed of ordure, emerging  
from the delicacies of refuse, see them,

larval and wriggling, in the meat behind eyes  
of fish, making meals of tongues in gaping mouths,

savoring rot's taste before even taking flight,  
before proboscis forms to puncture carapace,

to dine on visceral broth until stomachs distend—  
hear the buzz and siren of scavenging, see

still-hungry eyes glitter red before the banquet.

**Bugonia**

The empty barn on Jones-Meyer should suffice  
if you cover windows, block out blazing stars,  
be certain every condition is precise,  
hidden from the view of few passing cars.  
Rest me on a bed of Missouran dust  
before you break what remains, flesh and bone,  
my body yielding to death the way it must  
and decaying in airless dark alone.  
Let pass some three weeks, rippling with June heat,  
and return at last to see what is born,  
what carapace emerges, meat from meat,  
what arrival dispels the need to mourn:  
when, at last from my bones, the bees crawl free,  
their eyes, their stingers, hum my legacy.

### **Couple's Portrait as Black Vultures**

Inky, our wet eyes blink from the crags  
of stony faces, watching and sniffing

for what the interstate might offer  
on its shoulder, peppered with grit.

We take flight, circling each other,  
circling our carrion—you, eager

to watch the first bite, how its skin  
will split in the hook of my beak.

Landing, we indulge, hunch in sparse grass,  
your weathered head craning toward mine,

gore-wet, before plunging between  
already exposed ribs, their pale gleaming

against weeds and debris of our feasting,  
and I hiss with pleasure as you tear

doe's fleshy cheek free from the skull.

**Kudzu**

Every gap in the tree line is a hollow  
swarmed by verdant beasts, hunched  
and quavering with each breath,  
leafy scales catching the light  
in their ceaseless bid to feed,  
stifling and strangling and spreading  
over what has been felled beneath  
their weight, overwhelming barns  
that collapse behind roadside fences,  
where they press their throats  
against the barbs, bleed through wire  
to bend their necks toward the next meal.

### **Mother's Teeth**

Vacancy breathes deep between here and home,  
summer plains retreating from my headlights

hungry for something, anything to highlight:  
bluestem greening, one gnarled, barren tree,

before dozens of low eyes flash in an arc,  
a mass of tiny bodies, babies at their mother,

pink vines of their naked tails bright in her fur,  
her eyes gleaming emptiness, knowing nothing

but swollen moon, haphazard path, weight  
of brood's clinging. When hissing splits

her pointed face, angles her mouth to show  
white shards glinting, I know those bared teeth,

just as I always have, in the ferocious second  
before she retreats back into wild grass.



**Foxglove**

Between trees, I see you watch:  
slyly spying over tall grass,  
your blossoming turrets  
convene in shade. Rise,  
vigilant where you thrive  
in churned earth: showers  
will shake your stalks, make  
every heart-stopping leaf  
tremble so that, late spring,  
I can slip my fingers deep  
into your purpling mouths  
falling open with soft  
exhalations of invitation,  
a beckoning before a curse.

**Dreaming of Antares**

A road cast indigo  
in its mournful lateness:  
cicadas grip the night,  
vibrate with the effort  
of trying to drown out  
my own cries, my body  
seen only by the single red eye  
pressed to the heavens'  
keyhole, long after I have  
stopped looking for you.

**Night Drive**

I steer through woods unfamiliar

in shadow. Hours of road  
dissipate like a waking dream

behind me, its miles swallowed

by the cry of cicadas until  
predawn transforms low beams

on dark asphalt into stars

clustered at the horizon,  
collision of sky and earth at

the edge of sleepless sightlines.

**Last Time**

This willow marks  
the place we veer off-trail,  
part leafy tresses to amble

down creekbank's slope,  
settle against roots where

you weave me a circlet,  
make white clover a halo  
of starbursts while

I bend to harvest burrs  
from the edge of my sock,

their teeth pressed into  
the pads of my fingers,  
thorns for the crown

you set above eyes  
that avoid your devotion.



**Musk Thistle**

Familiar bloom, your violet globes  
saturate the route home, border  
fissuring roads and forgotten  
trails, paths that point toward  
unknown destinations. Prickly  
witness, spine and spike, trembling  
purple as I pass, you nod,  
you bow, you propagate, you extend  
an invitation to take root, too:  
fellow weed in the Kansan wild,  
we cannot leave each other behind.